

# Gourmet grains

***Fast and fabulous...  
try these wonderful  
gourmet grains!***

**T**he idea for this article came into being while I browsed among the supermarket shelves. There, alongside familiar packets of rice and flour, was a whole selection of grains and pastas – couscous, polenta, risotto – all delectable but none too common. That's what decided me to write this story, for they are as quick to cook as their familiar cousins and equally savoury, delectable and healthy. Try them alone, as a base for salads or with our mouthwatering casseroles.





## POLENTA

Polenta or cornmeal is made from corn kernels which are dried then ground into different grades, from fine to coarse. It varies significantly according to how it is ground; commercially processed cornmeal tends to be dry and granular; stone-ground cornmeal is less dry and has a richer flavour. If you are using it to make cornbread try to find a finely ground meal as it absorbs the liquids more easily. Occasionally you may see white cornmeal, which has a lighter texture. Most familiar to us, however, is the Italian form, polenta, which is basically a type of cooked cornmeal porridge. Basically being the operative word, it can be kept very plain and just cooked with water and salt or taken to the other extreme and enriched with milk, butter and cheese, or allowed to set, then sliced and fried until crispy and utterly delectable. Traditionally, polenta is cooked for a long time and stirred continuously. It is still very delicious, although not quite as creamy and soft, if cooked for a shorter time.

### CRISP FRIED POLENTA

1 quantity Creamy Polenta (see recipe next page)

Oil for frying

*Garnish:* Use your imagination here.

We used strips of roasted red capsicum and finely chopped fresh parsley, however, you can use lots of different toppings.

Try crispy fried onions; sautéed mushrooms; finely diced tomato with black olives or capers; slivers of blue cheese with toasted chopped walnuts and parsley, to name just some variations.

Make the Creamy Polenta recipe. Instead of adding polenta to serving dish, spread about 1cm thick on a damp surface or in a Swiss roll tin. Work rapidly as polenta sets quickly. Leave to cool and set, at least 20 minutes. Use a knife or pastry cutters to make shapes from the cold polenta. Heat oil in a large frying pan and cook slices until golden brown on both sides. Drain on absorbent paper. Serve as is or topped with various garnishes. I serve these with drinks topped with blue cheese (messy but divine), or served with a watercress, apple and nut salad to accompany a simple grill. **Serves 4-6.**



**1** Working rapidly, use a wet spatula to smooth the surface of the polenta. Leave to cool and set. The polenta can be covered and stored in the fridge overnight at this point.



**2** Either slice the cold polenta into diamonds with a sharp knife or use a pastry cutter to make different shapes.



**3** Fry the polenta over medium heat until golden on both sides. Turn carefully because the polenta softens as it cooks and breaks easily.

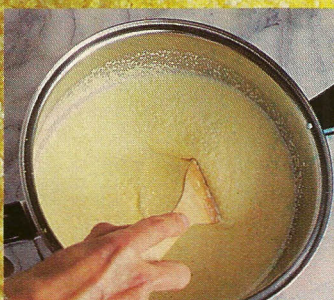


**4** Drain the polenta on paper to absorb any oil, then top and serve immediately.





**1** Add the polenta slowly in a thin stream so the milk keeps bubbling – this prevents the polenta forming lumps.



**2** Stir the polenta very regularly as it cooks to prevent sticking. Just watch out as air bubbles form – when they burst, boiling polenta goes flying and can be very painful if it lands on your unprotected skin! A really long-handled wooden spoon is the best tool for stirring.



**3** The polenta is ready when it is quite elastic and pulls away from the sides of the pot.



**4** Once ready, add the butter, Parmesan and egg yolks and stir until the cheese has melted.



### CREAMY POLENTA

1 litre milk  
Salt and freshly  
ground pepper  
200g polenta  
30g butter  
60g freshly grated  
Parmesan cheese  
2 egg yolks, lightly  
beaten

*Garnish: butter and  
snipped chives,  
optional*

Place milk in a large heavy-based saucepan, season to taste. Bring to boil over medium heat. Add the polenta slowly in a thin stream, stirring all the while. When all the

polenta is incorporated reduce heat to low and cook, stirring regularly, for about 15 minutes or until it acquires an elastic texture and pulls away from sides of pot. When ready, stir in the butter, Parmesan and egg yolks.

Serve immediately in a heated dish. Top with a dollop of butter and snipped chives. **Serves 4-6.**

*Note:* The polenta is fine as is, or dress it up and serve as a dish on its own topped with a tomato, mushroom or leek sauce.

*“ Just as quick to cook  
as their familiar cousins,  
these grains are savoury  
and delectable ”*





## RISONI

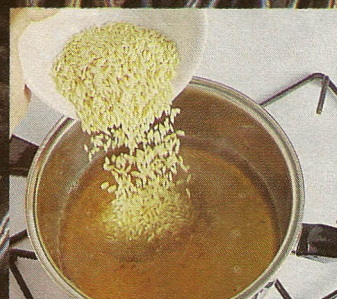
Not a grain at all but deceptively like one, risioli is really rice-shaped pasta. This is one dish to surprise your family or guests with, as what you see is not what you get, and those expecting rice have a lovely surprise. Basically, it is cooked as you would any other pasta, in lots of rapidly boiling water. You can toss it with butter and cheese, stir it into soup or try it, as we've done, with saffron and Parmesan cheese.

### SAFFRON RISONI

1½ cups chicken stock  
1½ cups water  
1 cup risioli  
¼ teaspoon saffron threads  
1½ tablespoons butter

¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper  
2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley, optional  
Lemon juice, to taste  
Bring stock and water to boil. Add risioli and cook

until al dente. While the risioli is cooking, remove 1 tablespoon of the hot cooking liquid to a small bowl or cup. Add the saffron threads and stir and crush with the back of a spoon to dissolve the threads as much as possible. Drain the risioli when ready. Melt the butter in the cooking pot and stir in the drained risioli and dissolved saffron. Toss, then add the Parmesan and salt and pepper to taste. Add the parsley and a squeeze of lemon juice, toss and serve immediately. Here we have added a ring of stir-fried spinach, which is a marvellous accompaniment to this subtle dish. **Serves 3-4.**



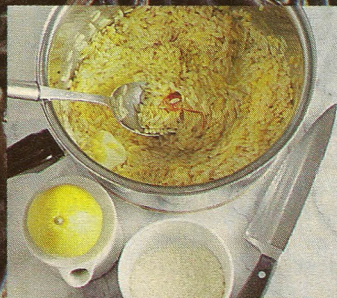
**1** Add risioli to the boiling stock and water.



**2** Saffron is the stigma of the saffron crocus. Over 250,000 blossoms are required to produce just 480g of dried threads: this makes it very expensive. A pinch is all that is needed to add a fragrant warmth to a dish.

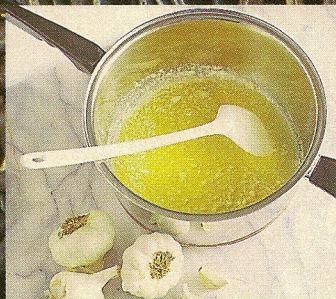


**3** A good trick for fine, dry, chopped parsley. Place chopped parsley in the corner of a tea-towel, twist to secure then run under cold water. Squeeze dry.



**4** The Parmesan and butter combine to make a creamy coating for the risioli.





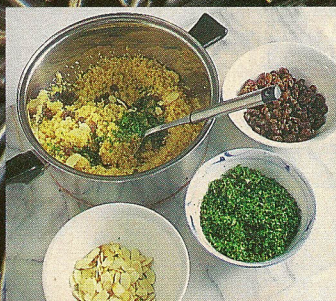
**1** Cook the garlic over very low heat to prevent it browning and becoming acid.



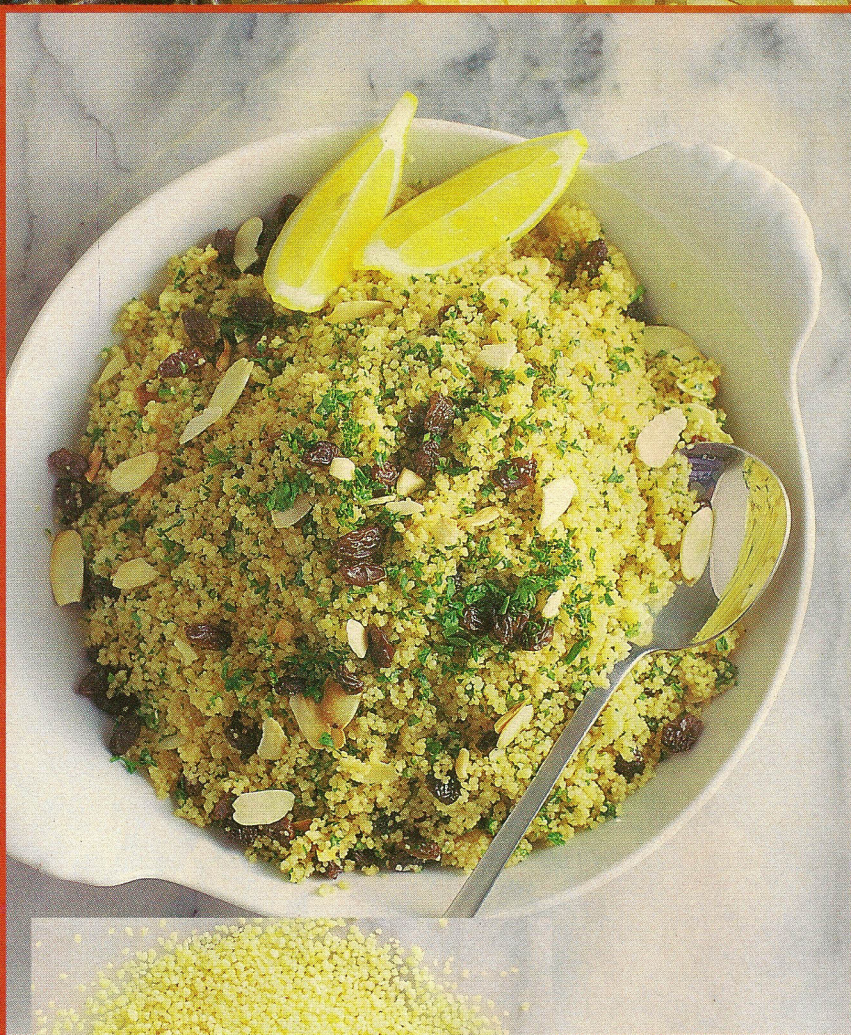
**2** Add couscous to the boiling stock and stir to mix.



**3** After couscous has stood, covered, for about 15 minutes, fluff up with a fork.



**4** Stir in the almonds, sultanas and parsley. There are lots of variations on this: try stirring in lightly cooked onions, mushrooms or leeks; different fresh or dried herbs, nuts etc.



## COUSCOUS

Couscous is both the name of a form of semolina and of the dish with which it is traditionally served. Semolina is the meal ground from hard wheat known as durum wheat and couscous is semolina which has been processed to form tiny pellets. These become tender and very light as they cook. In North African countries couscous is cooked in the steam that rises from a dish of slow-cooking meat, fish or vegetables. Traditionally, couscous requires three steamings but now there is a packaged 'instant' couscous available and, although purists reject it, it takes a mere 20 minutes from go to whoa and is delicious.

### QUICK COUSCOUS WITH ALMONDS

125g unsalted butter  
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
2 cups chicken stock  
340g (2 cups) 'instant' couscous  
125g sultanas  
60g toasted flaked almonds  
2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley

Melt butter over very low heat in a heavy-based saucepan. Add the garlic, cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the stock, bring to boil. Stir in couscous. Remove pan from heat, cover and let stand 10-15 minutes until all the liquid is absorbed. Fluff with a fork and stir in sultanas, nuts and parsley, reserving a little of each to sprinkle on top. Serve immediately. **Serves 4-6.**